

Jack Rendler

"Promoting Religious Freedom in North Korea": Jack Rendler Oral Testimony

Jan. 24. 2002

MR. RENDLER: Thank you. Thank you all for your work and for inviting me here. I'd like to go straight to some short-term action recommendations.

The President is traveling, I believe it's about a month from now to Japan, South Korea and China and I would like you to urge him to take this opportunity to express his concern for the plight of the North Korean people and his commitment to assisting in the restoration of their rights and their well-being. Other witnesses have testified to the need for the United States to support human rights wherever it's required and this is one of those cases.

I think that North Korea has gotten off light from the world community in terms of criticism by leaders because it is considered too isolated, too weird to talk to. The more we ignore them and treat them that way, the more it plays into their hands.

The Committee for Human Rights in North Korea has approached Special Advisor Elliott Abrams about this opportunity that the President has and I would urge you to perhaps communicate with him.

Second, I would say that Pyongyang has shown itself to be pretty sensitive to criticism in the U.N. Ambassadors fan out to approach delegates to various commissions at the United Nations to try to persuade them not to say what they're about the say about various conditions in North Korea and that's true in United States, as well. They expend a lot of effort on trying not to be criticized, especially when it comes to children and to economic and social concerns. As you might imagine, they're especially sensitive to, more sensitive to economic and social concerns than, I think, to criticism of economic and social conditions than to civil and political.

They are a party to the Convention on Civil and Political Rights and

the economic, social and cultural part of those rights and therefore have a responsibility to reporting to the U.N., which they sometimes take seriously, currently are taking seriously.

So therefore I would follow the lead of the Western European countries, which use these opportunities of these commission hearings and committee hearings to report on conditions as they know it in North Korea. And I think we should do the same and encourage, particularly encourage Western European countries to do that.

Again, echoing what Chuck said, we need to find new ways of providing information to the people of North Korea. We don't know exactly what the radios that North Koreans have can do. As you may know, North Korean households are provided with a radio that's provided to one frequency--that of the government information. I've heard from people that some of those radios in some parts of the country can pick up Voice of America and broadcasts from different parts of Asia and I would suggest that we put somebody on that, somebody who knows what they're doing with radio and television broadcasts.

CNN has been in Pyongyang since 1999. I'm sure that the top leadership of the government in Pyongyang watches CNN and watches a whole lot of other things, so I think our message on television might be tailored to the leadership while the message on radio could be tailored to the people.

Fourth, I don't know if it's within your purview to do this but I would suggest that you support the efforts of various North Korean activists to get a small congressional committee together, Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, on the model of what was done with Burma so that we have a committee in this country, in the Congress, that talks to their counterpart committees in other countries around the world, a parliamentary committee, parliamentary network, I guess it was called in the case of Burma, and it worked well to up the Burmese government on notice.

Fifth, I would, and I have to say here this is my opinion; I'm not necessarily speaking on behalf of the committee, but my inclination would be to provide as much humanitarian aid to North Korea as they can possibly absorb for a couple of reasons. One is it's the right thing to do. There are, as Dr. Vollertsen pointed out, there are a whole generation of children in certain parts of North Korea that are dying or going to die of starvation-related illnesses and we just morally owe it to those kids to get them what they need.

Secondly, I think that humanitarian aid organizations, as you'll note in what I've written for you, that has to be conditional on

distribution and monitoring of that aid by international relief organizations. I think that perhaps the most important presence in North Korea is that of international aid organizations and part of the reason is that they are at the intersection of political and civil rights on the one hand and economic and social and cultural rights on the other hand. They are the organizations who are able to see the most in the country and many of those organizations have, as you know, had to leave because of restrictions on their independence.

I think we need to recognize that a certain amount is going to go to the military and the rest should be carefully monitored.

I'd like to encourage corporations. Companies from the United States are starting to do business in North Korea, to set up facilities, and I think that they should be encouraged to adopt a Sullivan Principles approach to doing business there. They should be asked by this Commission how their activity there is going to promote human rights, how it will promote religious freedom.

I will skip over the People's Republic of China. I think it can be used as an advocate in some of these situations, particularly prison camps and labor camps.

But the last recommendation I had was for this Commission to support some new data. We need a report. We need a comprehensive report on the situation in North Korea. The last one that was done was done in 1987. It was very influential. It's still being referred to. It's still being used by people at the U.N. We ought to have something better than that. What's preventing human rights organizations, international, independent human rights organizations around the world from acting is a lack of information. It was done in 1987 when it wasn't any easier to get into North Korea. It's probably easier now because of the number of refugees and other people who are going in and out.

So I don't know what purview you have there, either, whether you can fund something or help get it rolling but we desperately need an independent organization to do that.

Finally, I'd like to say that I've been working on human rights violations for over 30 years now and I've decided to focus for the next while on North Korea and I'm doing it because I cannot think of a comparable situation that I have ever seen. I've never seen a government that is both capable and willing to both repress its citizens and starve them to death. And I've never seen a group of people, so many people, having their rights violated for so long in so many ways. I think that at this point enough is enough. We owe it to them to attempt to restore their rights to them. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN YOUNG: Mr. Rendler, thank you very much and thank you to all our panelists.